

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 12THE NEW REPUBLIC
12 May 1986

WHITE HOUSE WATCH

SNUBBING THE SOVIETS

PRESIDENT REAGAN and his top advisers gathered in the Situation Room at the White House April 16 to discuss the SALT II treaty. With a new Trident submarine about to come on line, should the administration dismantle two Poseidon subs in order to continue strict compliance with the pact? No way, argued Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and CIA director William Casey, if only because the Soviets are flagrantly violating SALT II. Better to comply, insisted Secretary of State George Shultz and arms negotiator Paul Nitze. In the middle was Kenneth Adelman, the chief of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, who favored a clear response to Soviet violations but something short of brazen defiance of the treaty.

So the discussion went for an hour. There was the usual handwringing over how the allies, some of them already upset over the Libyan raid a day earlier, might react. Naturally, those favoring compliance were worried about this. But all agreed that the administration must make a tangible protest of Soviet violations, perhaps by accelerating some weapons program not covered by the treaty.

One fear was not raised at all—fear that the Soviets might get into a snit, thus jeopardizing this year's summit between Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the United States. For all the talk in Washington about the summit, it was simply not a factor in the SALT II decision. In fact, it wasn't mentioned at all at the meeting.

This is new. When the administration faced a similar decision on SALT II last year, the summit was very much an ingredient in the decision to dismantle a Polaris sub and stay within the SALT II limits. This was what one aide called an "extra mild" approach, designed to soothe the Soviets and keep a summit on track. "There was a feeling then that 'Gosh, he [Reagan] has never met with a Soviet leader and he really has to,'" says a senior Defense Department official. "Well, now he has. And the need to have a summit has diminished. We have matured."

It's no surprise that a Weinberger aide is cool to summitry. But the sense that a summit isn't all that crucial reaches throughout the Reagan administration. "There used to be a preoccupation with a summit," says a White House aide. "We'd have it in the back of our minds all the time. Nobody mentions it anymore." Says an official who confers with Reagan daily: "If we don't have a summit this year, that's all right with us."

At the least, no one argues that American conduct must be checked to assure that a summit comes off in 1986. "The important point is that a summit is not seen as something you pay for, or something that you constrain your behavior to produce," says a White House official who pushed eagerly for last year's Reagan-Gorbachev session in Geneva. Given this attitude, the notion that the raid on Libya

might jeopardize a 1986 summit was "not high on the list of concerns," the Defense official says.

THE FELLOW YOU might expect to be most anxious about summit prospects, and most inclined not to rile the Soviets, is Shultz. Yet when the Soviets called off the May meeting between him and Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze at which this year's summit was to be planned, Shultz responded harshly. He accused them of failing to stop the Libyan terrorist attack on Americans in West Berlin that had prompted the U.S. bombing raid on Libya. He made this accusation on his own, without getting White House approval. "He has enough latitude to kick the Soviets if he wants to," says a White House aide. The notable thing is that he wanted to. "The Soviet Union is calling into question its commitment to the agreement reached at the Geneva summit for an intensified dialogue at all levels," Shultz's spokesman Bernard Kalb added. "... They have wasted six months since the [Geneva] summit. If they do not wish to meet [at a new summit], so be it." The vehemence of Shultz's rejoinder to the Soviets raised eyebrows even at the White House.

Why has summitry lost much of its appeal to the administration? One reason is the feeling that the Soviets are playing games with the date for the next summit. At Geneva last November, Reagan and Gorbachev agreed on a summit in the United States this year, followed by one in the Soviet Union in 1987. In December the administration proposed a June date, but the Soviets still haven't answered officially. "The president welcomes a summit in this country, but he doesn't want to be jerked around by Gorbachev on a date," says the Defense official. Gorbachev, on the other hand, prefers a later date in hopes of wringing concessions, particularly on arms control, from Reagan before then. "We want a quick summit so we wouldn't be subject to those pressures for concessions," says a Reagan aide.

July and August were always out as summit months because Reagan and others feel that it's a poor time to show off the country to Gorbachev. September and October are ruled out as well, because Reagan wants to campaign for Republican congressional candidates and won't have time to prepare. Some White House officials, Patrick Buchanan among them, favored a September or October date, saying Reagan would benefit no matter how a summit went then. If the summit achieved a breakthrough, it would help Reagan and the GOP politically. If Gorbachev stormed out in a huff, that would stir a nationalistic reaction, also aiding the president. Anyway, what's likely now is a November or December summit, assuming the Soviets really want one.

The refusal by the Soviets to agree on a date appears to be irritating Reagan as well as his aides. His public statements on the subject have gotten progressively sharper. On February 11 he declared at a televised press conference

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that he didn't think Gorbachev was foot-dragging on a date in order to force American concessions. On February 28 he suggested just the opposite. "Negotiations don't all take place just at the negotiating table when you meet," he said. "So I treat some of the things I hear—and I'm sure he treats things he hears about me—that we're both in a negotiating position." On March 11 the president complained to reporters at a White House breakfast that the Soviets hadn't agreed to a date. "If [a 1986 summit] does slip through our fingers, I've got news for them," he said. "There won't be an '87 summit in Moscow." On April 9 he said at a press conference that he had "made one thing plain. The fall months of our election are not going to be months that I will agree to a summit, and I will stick to that."

THERE'S A POLITICAL side to the waning enthusiasm inside the administration for a summit. A year ago Reagan needed a summit to snuff out the idea that he was too belligerent and wouldn't talk to the Soviets. In other words, he needed a summit for the sake of popularity. Now his popularity, as measured in public opinion surveys, is higher than for any president at this stage of his second term since polling began. That relieves a lot of the pressure for having a summit. "Certainly Gorbachev needs it more than Reagan does," says a senior White House official. "Reagan's established his credentials as a man of peace. He's solidified his grandfatherly image. The Democrats can't touch him anymore with that warmonger stuff." And there isn't that much to talk about on what is normally the major subject at summits, namely arms control. Gorbachev is calling for reductions in intermediate-range nuclear weapons, a new position for him, but "he'll have to give up a lot more," says a Shultz associate.

One official in the administration remains reasonably keen on having a summit—Reagan. He has his own reason, and it's not a thirst to sign an arms control treaty. Reagan has the belief that Gorbachev knows nothing about America and will be greatly affected if he is able to "see and feel" the country. Reagan thinks this may cure the Soviet leader of his idea that some evil military-industrial complex, manipulated by the Heritage Foundation and Hoover Institution, runs the country. Reagan's foreign policy advisers consider him naive about this, not taking into account that Gorbachev is a hardened Soviet bureaucrat and Communist ideologue. "How much will Gorbachev really see and feel when he travels here for a few days under heavy security?" a State Department official says. "Not much." Still, Reagan feels Gorbachev might be softened if he comes here for a summit. But the president isn't obsessed on the point. Six weeks ago he held a long meeting with his speechwriters on what he'll be saying this spring and summer. They never brought up the summit as a possible talking point. Neither did Reagan.

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